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A Small World: Lawrence Grad in Pakistan Helps Steer Afghan Refugee to Appleton

Posted on: September 16th, 2003 by Rick Peterson

Compared to fleeing the Taliban, Zubair Hakim figures Freshman Studies will be a piece of cake.

When Hakim speaks of his soon-to-be-official status as a member of Lawrence University's 2003 freshmen class, the voice of the 21-year-old refugee from Afghanistan suggests appreciation more than excitement. Understandably so.

His journey to the Appleton campus, thanks in part to some gentle guidance by a Lawrence alumna, has meant overcoming obstacles far more difficult than posting a high ACT score or writing a compelling application essay.

A member of Afghanistan's Farsi-speaking Tajik tribe, Hakim once called Kabul his hometown. But seven years ago this month, the life of the second-oldest son in a family of five, whose father served as dean of education at a medical institute and a mother who taught biology and chemistry at Kabul University, was suddenly and violently turned upside down when the fundamentalist Taliban came to power.

Within a day of the Taliban taking control of the government in Sept. 1996, his mother, Fatima Hakim Kamyar, lost her job, the victim of a decree which banned women from working or even leaving their homes without being accompanied by a male.

Soon after, the Taliban stripped Hakim's father, Abdul Hakimzada, of his position at the university, forbidding Farsi-speaking people from holding any positions of power or authority in the country. As Tajiks, Hakim and his family had even more reason to be afraid of Afghanistan's new Sunni Muslim leaders.

” There was always fear,” Hakim recalled of those early days of the Taliban regime. “We were told my father was being watched.”

Just two months after the Taliban assumed control, Hakim and his family, with little more than the clothes on their backs, left their home and boarded a bus headed to Pakistan. They eventually settled in the capital city of Islamabad, where his aunt had already moved.

His mother eventually landed a job teaching Farsi at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and Hakim learned of an opening for a translator. His fluency in four languages — English, Farsi, Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, and Pashtu, a language commonly used in both Pakistan and Afghanistan — eventually earned him a position in the visa/immigration department of the embassy.

During his eight months at the embassy, Hakim met Susan Raddant, a native of Shawano and a 1999 Lawrence graduate who turned her bachelor’s degree in government and international relations into a position with the U.S. State Department. Islamabad was one of Raddant’s first foreign assignments. Although she wasn’t on retainer for the Lawrence admissions office, Raddant began selling Hakim on the idea of attending college at her alma mater.

” My brother had attended Amherst and I really wanted to go to a college on the East Coast,” Hakim said. “But the more I talked to Susan, the more interested I became in Lawrence. I started checking out the website and saw they provided a high standard of education and they also had a high percentage of international students, both of which were appealing to me.”

Getting into Lawrence would prove easier for Hakim than getting into the United States. In Islamabad, he and his family began the

complex process of applying for official refugee status to come to America. After living nearly five years in Pakistan, their application was officially approved on Sept. 9, 2001. But their joy was short-lived. They soon learned what a difference 48 hours can make.

” We were all set to come to the United States in October, but then the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks occurred and everything got delayed,” said Hakim. “The whole process was stopped. Every man that had applied to come to the United States, whether as a refugee or an immigrant or a non-immigrant who was above the age of 16 and under the age of 45 had to go through an extensive FBI background check.”

It would take another 13 months before Hakim and his family would know true freedom.

” He is incredibly fortunate to come to the United States from that region of the world at this time,” said Claudena Skran, associate professor of government at Lawrence and a specialist on refugee issues. “Refugees are already the most carefully screened class of immigrants, but one of the first things the U.S. government did after 9/11 was stop processing refugee applications.”

Refugees are admitted to the United States on a quota system. For many years, that quota stood at 70,000. But in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the number of refugees that entered the United States fell to 26,000 last year — the lowest total since 1979 — barely a third of the actual quota.

” The revised policy is based on the mistaken belief that refugees are likely to be terrorists, when in fact refugees are more likely to be the victims of terrorists, tyrants and torture,” said Skran, author of the book “Refugees in Interwar Europe: The Emergence of a Regime.”

“In the wake of 9/11, the government instituted new security procedures, but they haven’t allocated enough resources and personnel to implement those procedures.”

While the wheels of government slowly turned, Hakim had little choice but to ponder a future rife with doubt.

” Life in Pakistan was really a life of constant uncertainty,” said Hakim. “We felt we were looked down upon. We never really knew when the Pakistani authorities would drive all the Afghans out of the country.”

After more than a year of patience-testing, the Hakims finally were allowed to leave Pakistan for the United States, arriving first in New York on Nov. 14, 2002 before making their way to Southern California to live near relatives.

” When we landed in New York, it was a great feeling. At last, I knew I wouldn’t have to run anymore. I wouldn’t have to go back to our burned-out house in Kabul,” said Hakim, who calls La Mesa, a suburb of San Diego, home today.

” Ever since I was old enough to think about college, I knew the best place to pursue higher education would be in the United States,” says Hakim, who is leaning toward majoring in government at Lawrence. “Now that the time is here, I am looking forward to being a student again.”

Arriving on campus this week, Hakim is one of 405 new students — drawn from the second-largest applicant pool in school history — who will begin a week of orientation activities Thursday, Sept. 18 before Lawrence opens its 154th academic year Sept. 24 with the first day of classes.

This year’s new students, which include 359 freshmen, 30 transfer students and 16 non-degree-seeking visiting international students,

matches last year's mark as Lawrence's highest number of new students since 1973, when 423 matriculated.

" We were able to enroll one of the largest classes of new students since the 1970s this fall, while at the same time improving upon our traditionally strong academic profile from the previous year," said Steve Syverson, dean of admissions and financial aid.

Collectively, this year's incoming freshmen achieved an average ACT score of 27.6, up from 26.9 a year ago and the number of students who ranked in the top 10% of their high school graduating class jumped from 34% a year ago to 42% this fall. The average high school grade point average among the incoming freshmen improved to 3.67.

" It's gratifying that the college continues its commitment to meeting the full financial need of every student who qualifies for admission," Syverson said. "That commitment enables us to recruit a diverse and interesting student body from a wide range of socio-economic, cultural and geographic backgrounds."

For the 2003-2004 academic year, 87% of all Lawrence students will receive need or merit-based financial aid. The average need-based financial aid package for the 2003-2004 academic year totals more than \$21,600.

In addition to Zubair Hakim, believed to be the first student from Afghanistan to attend Lawrence, a total of 54 first-year students hail from abroad, representing 29 countries, including Argentina, Latvia, Malawi, Nepal, and the Republic of Korea.